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THE
FOLLY AND EVIL TENDENCY
OF
SUPERSTITION
EXPOSED;
A
SERMON.

[Price One Shilling.]

THE
POLY AND EVIL TENDENCY
OF
SUPERSTITION
EXPOSED:



S. F. R. M. O. N.

[Price One Shilling]

THE
F O L L Y
AND
EVIL TENDENCY
OF
SUPERSTITION
EXPOSED:

A
S E R M O N,

SUGGESTED BY THE LATE

CONSECRATION OF COLOURS
IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THIS KINGDOM.

BY SAMUEL LOWELL.

SUPERSTITION IS THE AMUSEMENT OF CHILDREN, THE IDOL OF IDEOTS,
AND THE CONTEMPT OF SENSIBLE MEN.

ROBINSON.

Cambridge :

PRINTED AND SOLD BY B. FLOWER, AND F. AND M. JENNINGS ;
SOLD ALSO BY CONDER, KNOTT, CHAPMAN, AND THOMAS,
LONDON ; MARCH, NORWICH ; HEDLEY, LYNN ; AND RIDLEY,
AND THE AUTHOR, WOODBRIDGE.

M DCC XC V.



P R E F A C E.

IT is so usual for whatever has the least semblance of a book, to have something like a preface, containing the author's apology and design, that the most trivial performance seldom ventures abroad without some such introduction; and if a person is desirous of communicating his thoughts to the world, a plausible reason is generally assigned. I might, in the present instance, avail myself of the common-place excuse, of pressing solicitations from some who heard the following discourse from the pulpit: I will not, however, take advantage of that circumstance, but frankly confess, that from a humble hope the Sermon may, in some degree, operate as a check to ignorance, I willingly, but with the utmost deference, submit it to the candour of such as may condescend to peruse it; re-

questing them to remember, that at the time of its delivery nothing could be more remote from my thoughts than its surviving (except in the recollection of my hearers) the services of the day. I can truly say, that the transactions referred to in the title page, have given me very sensible pain, as they afford melancholy proof of the disposition of some (who are too well informed not to know better) to continue to impose upon the poor deluded multitude that absurd falsehood, of the war being carried on for the defence of religion. Alas! whatever *religion* it is intended to defend, we are sure it is not christianity; for the great founder of that divine system informs us, that *His kingdom is not of this world, else would his servants fight*. Affecting proofs are also given of the ease with which the crowd are misled. To see them press by thousands to such a service—to hear their unqualified approbation of it—to find that they mistake it for devotion—and that they consider it as an evidence of the piety of this country, notwithstanding the contempt which themselves and others cast upon almost every divine command;—these are things which must surely awaken sentiments of pity in every mind not totally destitute of all religious knowledge. If ten thousand ceremonies had been performed, they would

would never have drawn an animadversion from me, providing the performance had not assumed a *religious* air; but I make no apology for what may, perhaps by some, be termed my “officioufness;” as I conceive the public conduct of public characters, is fairly open to the remarks of any who may think proper to make them; and as I am sure my motives are such as will secure the approbation of my own mind, I can give the most severe but little reason to hope for gratification from my disquietude, whatever censure may be pronounced. I have spoken freely respecting the establishment, but wish it to be remarked, that my objections against “THE CHURCH,” (as it is pompously termed) are not greater than against *every other NATIONAL church*. The Episcopalian sect seem to entertain a notion that the Dissenters wish to see the present forms established by law, done away, and something of their own substituted in their room. I will venture to say, that these are *not* the wishes of such Dissenters as understand the just grounds of our nonconformity; for our desires are, that Christianity may be delivered from *all* its shackles, and that it may stand upon the basis upon which it nobly stood, in the first ages of the Christian church; being persuaded, that every church, founded on human laws,

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and governed by the civil magistrate, is antichristian. I hope I should most sincerely rejoice in the universal reign of Christian love and benevolence, but am fully convinced, that it must be preceded by the light of truth: if the faintest ray shall be found to shine from the labours to which my life is devoted, I shall esteem myself amply rewarded.

ACTS xvii. 22.

PAUL STOOD IN THE MIDST OF MARS'-HILL, AND
SAID, YE MEN OF ATHENS, I PERCEIVE THAT
IN ALL THINGS YE ARE TOO SUPERSTITIOUS.

IT is not possible that any thing can be more opposite to reason or revelation than superstition; yet the history of every past age, as well as the transactions of the present, unite in testifying, that it gains an easy admission into the human mind, and that its expulsion is a task of the greatest difficulty. The *Heathen* worship was a mixture of fable, absurdity, and impiety; yet its deluded votaries zealously guarded it with numerous laws, and not unfrequently punished those with death, who ventured, from a conviction of its folly, to oppose, or desert it. Even the *Jews*, who were favoured with an express revelation from God, discovered an amazing propensity (prior to the *Babylonish captivity*) to this criminal weakness; which occasioned that reflection, *My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.*

profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed ~~two~~ evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. Athens, the place where we now find the apostle exercising his ministry, was a celebrated city of Greece; renowned for the magnificence of its buildings, and the learning, wealth, and conquests of its inhabitants. It gave birth to Socrates, Demosthenes, and other famed philosophers and orators. Amidst all their boasted splendour, Paul beheld them enveloped in the mists of superstition; but feeling a generous wish for their deliverance, endeavoured to apprize them of their folly, by saying, *Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.* Some tell us, that the occasion of this altar being erected, was as follows: At a time when the plague raged among the *Athenians*, they were divided in sentiment respecting the god to whom their addresses should be offered, for the removal of this calamity. In process of time the plague ceased, and they were then equally divided in opinion, respecting the deity to whom the honour of their deliverance was to be paid. In vain they endeavoured to convince each other, and so at length agreed that an altar should be raised, bearing the inscription which excited the notice of the apostle.

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Though the preaching of *Paul* at *Athens* does not appear to have been attended with any very remarkable success, yet his labours were far from being in vain. A part of the city still remains, and is said to contain from eight, to ten thousand inhabitants, three fourths of which make a profession of christianity. Let us indulge a hope, that out of so considerable a number, there are some at least, who worship the Father of the Universe, in spirit and in truth.

I have no intention of inquiring into the peculiarities of the superstition of the *Athenians*; but shall take the liberty of remarking,

FIRST, That there is a disposition in man which leads him to the indulgence of this folly. We shall then,

SECONDLY, Consider some of the evils attendant upon it.

THIRDLY, Inquire into the cause of its prevalence,—and,

LASTLY, Attempt some improvement of the subject, by offering two or three things to your attention, by way of antidote against it.

In the FIRST place then we say, There is a disposition in man, which leads him to the indulgence

dulgence of superstition. But before we proceed it will be proper to define the term. " Superstition is of two kinds, which may perhaps be distinguished from each other, by calling one a *vulgar*, and the other a *religious* superstition." By *vulgar superstition*, I mean that attention which is so frequently paid by weak minds, to what are called *ominous events*. By *religious superstition*, I mean those false ideas of godliness, which are the corruption, and bane of that worship which the Divine Being requires. *Religious* superstition, the subject we at present discuss, is a weak scrupulosity, proceeding from timid, fearful apprehensions of the severity of the Almighty. The superstitious seem to think the Great Jehovah as weak, as they imagine him imperiously austere; for their conduct always appears to indicate, that they have ideas of his being easily appeased by any parade, or solemnity, if it be but performed with a sufficient degree of external grimace. " Religious superstition may be divided into *notions*, " *passions* and *actions*. Superstitious *notions* of God, " are such ideas as are inconsistent with His character, who is declared to be *Glorious in Holiness*, and *Infinite in Understanding*. Superstitious " *passions* are those emotions of mind, produced " by representations of the Deity, and of his " worship, which are not founded in truth, but " in the vain imaginations of mankind. And superstitious *actions*, are those parts of a person's " conduct, naturally resulting from notions so " formed,

“formed, and passions so excited.”* That men are disposed to superstition, will appear, by the united testimony of sacred and profane history, as well as from that which daily comes under our own observation.

(1.) From the sacred records we understand, that in the early ages of time, men discovered an inclination to this absurdity. *Abraham's* father's family served other gods, beyond the river *Euphrates*. And it is equally plain, that *Laban* had idols, to which *Rachel* also discovered too great an attachment. The family of *Jacob* were once so far apostatized, as to occasion the good patriarch to say to his household, *Put away the strange gods that are among you, and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way that I went.* In after ages, the *Jewish kings*, as well as others, were the ignorant, zealous advocates of the most abominable idolatry. Though the wisdom of *Solomon* is justly celebrated, yet there were periods even in the life of that great man, wherein he appeared in the character of a fool: Yes, even *Solomon* went after *Ashtoreth*, the goddess of the *Zidonians*, and after *Milcom*, the abomination of the *Ammonites*. And he built an high place for *Chemosh*, the abomination of *Moab*; and for *Molech*, the abomination of the children of *Ammon*. The faithful voice of truth,

* For these sentiments I am indebted to the late Mr. Robinson, though I have not exactly followed his language.

in the pointed reproofs, and tender expostulations of the prophets, spoke so plainly, that she must have been heard, had not the united clamour of pride, ignorance, and prejudice been raised against her. But while *their* yelling vociferations were maintained, the force of reason, the alarm of denunciation, and the allurements of promise, were all insufficient to reclaim these deluded madmen. The kings of *Israel*, should have been the friends and guardians of the prophets of the Lord; but they frequently, in the most wanton manner, rewarded their honest censures of superstition, by imprisonment, and every cruel form of death.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of *Babylon*, gave full proof, that the warmth of his zeal, for the maintenance of the worship which he had espoused, was not inferior to the passionate ardour discovered by the *Jewish* kings. In the genuine insulting tone of a royal persecutor, he said, *O! Shadrach! Meshach! and Abednego! do ye not serve my gods? nor worship the image which I have set up? If ye fall down and worship the image which I have made, well; but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace, and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?*—Such was the intolerant insolence used by these blasphemous defenders of ancient superstition; and while we recollect, that the thunderbolts of eternal justice did not instantly fall upon the heads of these cruel tyrants, we record these things among
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the most striking instances of *his* forbearance, who is emphatically stiled—THE GOD OF PATIENCE.

When Christianity was introduced into the world, it made its first appearance in the *Roman Empire*; but as it was presently discovered to be prejudicial to the *established* religion, a profession of its doctrines became a capital offence; the Christians in great numbers were put to death, and in many instances without even the semblance of trial, or any thing like an opportunity of defending themselves. Such was the settled determination of these furious zealots, to guard by every precaution the established absurdities, that they knew nothing even of toleration; and such was their rage against those who ventured to exercise the right of private judgment, that a follower of *Christ* might, with propriety, have said, *Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet me, rather than a fool in his folly.* Brethren, the friends of civil and religious liberty in this country, are not without just grounds of complaint; but when we compare our situation, with the hapless circumstances the injured men to whom we now refer, surely we have reason for saying, *The lines are fallen to us in pleasant places; yea, we have a goodly heritage.*

(2.) If we were to consult *Ecclesiastical History*, that disposition in man, which leads him to the indulgence of superstition, would become still more and more evident. The superstitions which have disgraced what is called the “Christian world,”

world," have generally, as from a native source, issued from the church of Rome; which is the mother of ignorance, the sink of corruption, and the protectress of all the enormities and vices of human nature. It would be tedious to attempt an enumeration of a thousandth part of the scandalous corruptions, which are so cautiously guarded in that savage institution. Were it necessary, we might remind you of the boasted power of the priests to pardon the guilty, and to grant indulgencies for the commission of every vice with impunity. We might put you in mind of the supposed infallibility of that *Man of sin, the son of Perdition*, who receives divine honours, by the blasphemous titles which he assumes; and of the damnation which he, maniac-like, pronounces upon all who are not connected with this irrational communion. "Different kinds of superstition deserve different treatment, according to the nature and degree of the evils of which they are productive. Some are at least comparatively harmless, others are pitiable, some are laughable, and others are beyond expression horrible." There was a time when the protestants of Zurich in Switzerland, would not drink the wine in the *Lord's* supper out of any vessels except *wooden* cups; from an idea of their best agreeing with primitive simplicity. At the same time their neighbours at Bern were equally attached to silver; but the French protestants petitioned for the use of tin. These were all comparatively

ratively harmless. To see a man prevailed upon to believe, that a few drops of stinking oil sprinkled upon him, will become the means of preserving his body from accidents, and of sanctifying his soul, because it was taken from a lamp placed by the tomb of a reputed saint, is a superstition truly pitiable. It was once ordained in Switzerland, that no person should go to church except in black clothes, nor even in them, if they were made in the modern stile; but surely when this law was enacted, the framers of it forgot the risibility of mankind. But there are superstitions which are horrid; and of this description are all those which circumscribe the liberties, or endanger the lives of men. To a generous mind, how shocking must it be, to behold Ignorance imbruing her hands in the blood of a fellow creature, under the strange delusion of pleasing the God of unbounded love and mercy! Humanity sickens at the sight, Compassion stands by and weeps, while Indignation spurns the guilty wretch from her presence.

(3.) But from what appears in our *own* time, we perceive the folly of men in the inclination which they discover to superstition. Methinks you are here ready to say, "Yes, and if we were in some foreign countries, how plainly would their superstitious weakness appear!" But permit me to say, that if you see not this weakness at home in its most degraded form, I know not how to account for it, but by concluding, that *blindness in part hath happened to Israel.*

Sorry

Sorry should I be to give *just* ground of offence to any man, however opposite he might be to myself, in his mode of thinking, either upon civil or religious subjects. I wish always to distinguish between *persons* and *things*; and sincerely hope, that if I speak freely of the *national establishment*, you will properly discriminate between the establishment itself, and those who are connected with it; many of whom are highly respectable, and whose friendship I cordially esteem. Having made this explicit declaration, I have no hesitation in saying, that the *Church of ENGLAND* * appears to me, to be founded in court policy, and that the edifice is raised by the hands of superstition; nor do I apprehend that I break the laws of candour by conceiving of it, under the notion of popery in a less glaring, but more artful form;† for it is of little importance to any community, whether they are under a pope at Rome, who is infallible, or under one at home, who is incapable of doing wrong. That the Church of England is superstitious, most certainly appears, from the sanctity which it attributes to places—the holiness which it ascribes to garments—the observa-

* I use the phrase in the general confused acceptation of it, having never yet seen it satisfactorily defined; and I suppose never shall.

† Nothing like a reflection upon the memories of the venerable men commonly called “The Reformers,” is here intended; they were the best friends to Liberty, civil and religious, that the times knew, and perhaps went as far as existing circumstances would permit; but nothing could be farther from their thoughts, than an idea of their work being so perfect, as to be incapable of improvement.

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tion of times not of divine appointment—by making baptism essential to salvation—by giving her ministers a supposed power of absolution—by pronouncing the sentence of eternal death upon all who do not believe what she terms—“The Catholic Faith;” by requiring from every one of her ministers, an unfeigned *assent* and *consent* to *all* and *every thing* contained in the book of *Common Prayer*, and in the *thirty-nine articles*; with a great variety of other absurdities, equally remote from every sentiment and principle of genuine Christianity.* While pursuing the subject of superstition, it is not possible that we should entirely overlook the late displays of it, as exhibited in various parts of the kingdom, and now brought to our very doors.† To a benevolent mind, how painful must it be, to see men whose professed office it is, to feed the sheep of Christ, (and who are more than amply paid for the faithful discharge of their office) how painfully disgusting to see these *very* men consecrating banners of blood, intended to be waved as signals for their destruc-

* Those who wish to see this subject in a brief, forcible form, are referred to *Palmer's Protestant Dissenter's Catechism*; and such as wish to read an elegant book upon it, (which no one dares attempt to answer) are referred to *Towgood's Dissenting Gentleman's Letters*. On the subject of *Subscription*, see *Flower on the French Constitution*, and *on the Necessity of a Reformation in Church and State in Great Britain*. Chap. 3. in which the evidence is almost wholly drawn from the most celebrated writers in the established church.

† This discourse was delivered on the first Lord's day after the consecration of the colours belonging to the Yeomanry Cavalry at Woodbridge.

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tion! *O! tell it not in Gath! publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon!*

Here, perhaps, some of you may be apprehensive that *I* also am exceeding the lines of *my* province; but if such are your thoughts, permit me with all that respectful affection which I feel, to say, I think you are mistaken. I avowedly stand here for the defence of truth: reason suggests, that to expose error, is to contribute towards the safety of its opposite: of that method I to day avail myself; nor can I, with tame servility, crouch to the prejudices of mistaken times. The *Athenians* might have told *Paul*, that as he was not of their church, it became him not to interfere in their religious rites and ceremonies; and no doubt he anticipated the contempt of some of them at least, but like an honest man, fired with zeal for truth, he said, *Ye are ignorant worshippers; in all things ye are too superstitious.*

If we had read of the late tawdry exhibitions, having taken place in some remote age of barbarism, it would have excited a smile; we should have pitied the performers, and passed by the circumstance; but when we see these things taking place at the close of the eighteenth century, among a people, who at the very moment are boasting of their superior information, it awakens other sentiments. However, I waste not your time upon a business, which I am persuaded, every thinking man amongst you must cordially despise. But methinks your impartiality leads you to say,
 " That if Dissenters have superstitions, they
 ought

ought in the same unreserved manner to be exposed." In every view of that kind, I most sincerely unite with you. Like other men we have doubtless our foibles and imperfections, but superstition does not appear (to me at least) to be amongst the number; * and even our enemies, when they profess to delineate our character, do not make superstition any part of the colouring, but paint us in the opposite dress of enthusiasm.† To the superstitious the inspired apostle proposes this rational question,—“*Why are ye subject to ordinances, after the commandments and doctrines of men?*” And Jesus Christ says respecting the same characters, *In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.* We proceed,

SECONDLY, to consider some of the evils attendant upon superstition. It were a vain attempt to endeavour to enumerate fully the mischiefs to which it gives birth, for it is an evil root, from which various branches grow, each of which gives existence to innumerable shoots, all loaded with noxious leaves and fruits, so that the hemisphere is darkened with its shade, and the earth infected with its influence. To speak without a figure :

* Men of weak minds in every community, are doubtless liable to superstition; but the idea suggested here, is, That there is not any thing in the genuine principles of Protestant Dissenters, which is in itself calculated to beget or foster it.

† See Hume's Essay on Superstition and Enthusiasm.

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(1.) It promotes the worst kind of ignorance. Every thing around us seems to invite to improvement. The sun no sooner rises above the horizon, than it aspires to meridian splendour; universal nature is in a progressive motion; and every art and science is verging to a state of perfection. The vicissitude so plainly inscribed on every thing beneath the sun, and the anxiety for farther advances in happiness, of which the most fortunate are the subjects, unite in proving that religious knowledge is of unspeakable importance. But superstition is the bane of mental improvement, and the guardian of ignorance. Look round the world, and you will almost invariably perceive, that in the proportion men are wedded to superstitious rites and ceremonies, they are ignorant of whatever comes under the idea of "*Pure and undefiled Religion.*" And affecting as the truth is, they are likely to remain in all the grossness of darkness; for such is the strength of their prejudice, that they dread conviction, and fly from the means of instruction, as from a pestilential disease. In vain do the resplendent rays of truth beam around them; for amidst all their glorious refulgence, by obstinately closing their eyes, they shall remain in darkness. Well might the Psalmist describe them, by saying, *They know not, neither will they understand.*

(2.) The evil of superstition is further discovered, by the intolerance and cruelty with which it inspires its votaries. How dreadfully apparent these hateful dispositions have ever been in the
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imposers of superstitious rites, we have before had painful occasion to observe. I wish not to dwell upon a theme so agonizing to minds which have imbibed the benevolent, sympathetic spirit of *him* who *came not to destroy mens lives, but to save them*; but the order which we pursue, forbids that we should in this part, entirely pass over the atrocious crimes of which superstition has been guilty. In the Church of Rome, she has in cold blood, put thousands, and tens of thousands to death, by every torture which infernal ingenuity could possibly suggest. She has caused the tears, and blood, of our dear countrymen to flow. Yes, she it was, whose detested hands enkindled the flames in Smithfield, when the voice of lamentation and woe, was in such distressing accents heard in every corner of the *British* isles. Happy should we be, if truth would permit us to say, that this *Fury* had never been permitted to gratify her cruel disposition, in the Church of England; but, whatever desire we may have to forgive, it cannot yet be entirely forgotten, that in one reign only, of the last century, the Dissenters of this country, had millions of their property wrung from them, by iniquitous fines, and that thousands of themselves perished in prison under her inhuman dominion.

It is not very uncommon for us to be told, that at this day we are under the greatest obligations to "*The Powers that be*," for the privileges which we enjoy, and that we should thankfully accept of the gracious boon, and be cautious how we

discover any thing like dissatisfaction, lest by our discontent our liberties should become more circumscribed. But this is language, at which every one who feels himself a man, must instantly revolt. We enjoy no liberties but those which are our native and unalienable rights, and which cannot possibly be infringed, without an evident injury being on our part sustained. I do not know that I can illustrate my sense of obligation better, than by a familiar simile. If an highwayman stops me upon the road, and demands my money, but only takes a part of the property which he finds upon me, perhaps it may be possible to conceive of my obligation to the robber, because he has not taken the whole; and I think, I cannot honestly say, that my gratitude rises higher than the natural result of these sentiments. There are still many severe laws in force against Dissenters; till these are all openly renounced, they continue to disgrace our venerable code, and prove the existence of a spirit of persecution.

(3.) The mischievous effects of superstition are further discoverable, inasmuch as it renders men tame and abject, and fits them for a state of slavery; and so, it at once gives being to the oppressor, and the oppressed. When we read of whole nations in a state of vassallage, servilely bending before a set of ignorant, haughty, avaricious priests; we know not which to admire most, the audacious insolence of the masters, or the tame subjection of the slaves. Amidst our astonishment, a moment's reflection is sufficient to inform

form us, that Superstition is the only instrument that fits the mind to the shackles, which degrading servitude thus rivets upon the abject part of mankind. In our own country we observe too, that the superstitious, are the first to crouch before the designing sycophants of the day, and the most forward in forging the chains, which are designed to bind themselves, and their fellow citizens, in the fetters of wanton despotism. But the evils of this offensive absurdity, are not bounded even here, for superstition has in its train, consequences of a more dreadful description, than any we have yet glanced at; for,

(4.) It leads men from the proper object of all religious worship and adoration, to things by which they will at length be fatally deceived. Faith in his dear name, *Who is the image of the invisible God, and the first born of every creature, and who hath suffered for sins, the just for the unjust*; Faith in that sacred name, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS, is the only ground which the scriptures of eternal truth lay for the hopes of guilty men; but the stupifying influence of this folly, leads the mind to a self-complacency, from the uninteresting circumstances of membership with some particular church, or pompous ceremonies performed, to the neglect of the great and all-atoning sacrifice of the cross. You know it is no part of my character to be the retailer of anecdote from the pulpit, and sorry should I be to do any thing by which I might be justly charged with breaking the laws of decorum, which you have a right to expect should
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be preserved inviolate in this place; but I know not how to pass by a circumstance, which at this moment occurs to my mind; a circumstance which ought not to occasion a smile, but should rather excite compassion for the superstitious. A lady (whose family I well knew) in the north of England, was bending beneath a weight of years and infirmities, and confined to a bed of sickness, from which she never arose. During her illness, a friend who visited her, suggested a thought, relative to the importance of a well grounded hope in the prospect of dissolution. The lady confessed the force of the remark, and informed her friend, that she now experienced the happiness of it; for though it was a felicity of which few could boast in these unstable times, it afforded her unspeakable consolation, that she could say, that *in no one instance of her life, had she ever worshipped upon unconsecrated ground!* Such was the gross ignorance which superstition nursed, in the mind of one who was a person of (what the world calls) "some family and fashion." Alas, my brethren! we have too much cause for believing, that thousands who sustain the name of Christian, cannot give a better *reason of the hope that is in them.*

Enough has, perhaps, been said to prove, that superstition is an evil of a very serious nature; let reason, and the sacred writings of the holy scripture, be diligently employed against it; and if in a social hour we are disposed to laugh, perhaps our risible powers will never be more usefully employed, than by trying to put this impudent

dent vice out of countenance; and if ever the emendation of the established liturgy is committed to me (though I hardly think myself in the way of preferment) the people shall then be instructed to say, *From Priestcraft and Superstition, good Lord deliver us.* We now pass on,

THIRDLY, To inquire into the causes of the prevalence of this folly.

(1.) The native darkness of the human mind, is doubtless to be considered as the sad occasion of many of the stupid absurdities of which we complain. To this cause the holy apostle attributed the superstition of the idolatrous Gentiles; his words are,—“ *When they knew God, (i. e. when they had some general conception of his being and glory) they glorified him not as God, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God, into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.* Doubtless, some who were concerned in the introduction of these things, could not but be sensible of their vanity; but being crafty politic men, and having some concealed purposes to accomplish by these means, they would speak of their importance, and represent all the *nonconformists* of those times as enemies to the state. Having to do with an uninformed people, they would find their deceptions but seldom called in question; for the unthinking multitude in every age and country, are too generally

generally disposed to pay a blind, implicit obedience to the creeds and modes of worship imposed by men in authority, without considering that the religious homage which the Almighty receives from his creatures, is a business in which no power on earth hath any right to interfere. The patrons of superstition, have ever been aware of the important services rendered to their cause, by the reign of ignorance; hence they have uniformly discouraged free inquiry, knowing that if information find its way to the minds of the people at large, it must be fatal to their tyranny. Thus *Antiochus*, who seemed determined that the Jews should no longer worship the God of Israel, but bow before his idols, *Rent in pieces the books of the law, and burnt them with fire; or if any consented to the law, the king's commandment was, that they should put him to death.* With fawning meanness to have cringed before so imperious a wretch, would have been unworthy the character of men; we therefore applaud the valour of the oppressed Jews who went against the tyrant, saying, *We fight for our lives and laws.* The superstitious emperor *Diocletian*, began his dreadful persecution of the Christians, by burning all their books and writings,* but *the more he afflicted them, the more they grew*; and thus it is with narrow-minded bigotry, ever defeating its own ends by the means it employs to attain them. The spirit of *Diocletian* is daily manifested in this country by the superstitious, who wish not the people to

* See Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History. Vol. 1. p. 125.

read, or if they cannot be prevented from reading, their next desire is, that nothing should be perused tending to shake the Babel of folly, left in its present tottering state it be thrown down, and not one stone left upon another. Deception has ever sought the shade as a place of concealment, and involved herself in mystery with a view to the discouragement of inquiry; while Truth, with open countenance, walks abroad in the light of the meridian sun, inviting every traveller she meets to listen to her voice, and with nice investigation to examine all she utters. May her beauteous form allure our hearts, and the words of her mouth be ever sacred in our estimation.

(2.) The uninformed having in general so little of the spirit of inquiry, is another unhappy source from whence superstition springs. Amidst the clouds of error in which truth is enveloped, a person must make several sacrifices before he will have it in his power properly to distinguish between the one and the other. The man of indolence must part with those habits of indulgence by which his hours and days are consumed; the positive man must give up his prejudices, under the influence of which he now so peremptorily decides upon every question; the voluptuous man must part with the inordinate gratification of his senses: and there are instances wherein *all* these sacrifices must be made by an individual, before he will part with his superstition. This is the price to which Solomon referred, when he said, *Buy the truth, and sell it not.*

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But, alas! how few are there who are willing to be at so much expence for the sake of truth! The great majority of mankind are engaged in pursuits which appear to their earthly, contracted minds, of far greater importance; and they prefer the risk of being mistaken in the most momentous concerns, to the labour and cost attendant upon impartial inquiries after truth. Well, if men are determined to give corruptible things the preference to those which are incorruptible; let them not however forget, that the day approaches, wherein the inexorable voice will pronounce such words as these—*I called, and ye refused. Ye shall be filled with your own devices. Ye shall call upon me, and I will not answer.* May the God of truth inspire us with a spirit of serious and diligent inquiry, that we may no longer be the sport of fancy, but partakers of that *understanding which is a well-spring of life unto him that hath it.*

(3.) Much of the prevalence of superstition is likewise to be attributed to the craft of designing men, whose interest it is, to perpetuate the deception; and they have many resources of which they avail themselves. They are frequently heard proclaiming the greatness, and wisdom of those, who first introduced the pageantry which they wish to preserve. Thus the *Gentiles* told the idolaters, (whom they found to be useful tools in their state manufactories) that their worship had the authority of men who were inspired by the gods for its countenance and support; and thus in the church of Rome, superstition receives many

many a prop from the example of their wicked saints, whose *lying wonders* are palmed upon the credulous multitude. But perhaps there are scarcely any superstitious rites, which have not some name of respectability attached to them as their patron, which circumstance cannot fail of producing an unhappy effect upon the minds which do not venture to think for themselves.

The antiquity of established rites (however inconsistent) is sometimes urged as an apology for their continuance. This, the members of the establishment of this kingdom, not unfrequently offer as a reason why every thing in their church, should remain in its present form. If there was any thing in this bearing the semblance of argument, the church of Rome might much more gracefully adopt it than the Church of England; and it might be used as a ground of persuasion for the worship of idols, with much more propriety than by either of them. All that can possibly be advanced respecting the continuance of ceremonies, upon the principle of their antiquity, goes upon a supposition that former ages were not liable to mistake; which is a position that one would think only needs mentioning, effectually to expose: and yet even this folly is not seen by the multitude. To strengthen the prejudices of the deluded, the designing frequently tell them, that these things constituted the religion of their forefathers, and perhaps were never so much as suspected by their parents; and the instinct by which we feel ourselves impelled to reverence those

who gave us birth, is played upon for the ignoble purpose of keeping the mind in bondage; and we are considered as casting a reflection, if not committing an outrage upon the memories of our fathers, because we dare to exercise the right of private judgment, not considering that christianity enjoins, *that every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.*

The approbation of law-givers, kings, philosophers, the great and powerful of the world, is sometimes brought as a reason why we should not refuse subjection to what *they* have thought proper to countenance and enjoin; and notwithstanding all that the scriptures affirm, and all that observation proves, respecting the general ignorance of the *mighty* and *noble* in things of a religious nature, yet it is with the utmost difficulty that the great body of the people in any country are prevailed upon to believe, that their national establishment can possibly be founded in error and superstition. The prophet being aware of this amazing strength of prejudice, said, *All people will walk every one in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD.*

Much pomp and splendour is generally seen in the worship of the superstitious, which has an amazing effect upon vulgar minds. The modest simplicity of pure *Religion*, which never courts the public eye, silently passes by unobserved, or if through accident she is seen by the crowd, as they know not her virtues, they perhaps despise, when they ought to adore. On the contrary, Superstition

perstition labours to fix the attention of all the world upon her gay attire, the external shew of her gaudy trappings; she does what she can to charm the ear, and by every stratagem to allure the senses. The ceremonies of Paganism, were performed in temples of the most splendid magnificence, their idols were frequently of pure silver or gold, and their music perfectly enchanting. These things produced the effect which was intended, by drawing the multitude after them; the church of Rome followed the example, and in proportion as other churches have departed from primitive christianity, they have become imitators; and to this day, the admirers of superstition, are in numbers beyond all proportion, when compared with the few who walk in the silent retreat of wisdom's way. The abettors of these false notions of religion, have generally told those whom they wish to gain, that the persons who renounce these canonized absurdities, are only of the lower orders of the people, and that these are rather to be despised than thought worthy of imitation. So when the dignified simplicity of JESUS CHRIST, so powerfully overcame the prejudices of the subordinate officers, as to constrain them to say, *Never man spake like this man*, the inventive faculties of the *Jewish Doctors* could produce no other reply to the convictions which men felt, than, *Have any of the rulers, or of the Pharisees, believed on him? This people, who know not the law, are cursed.*

In

In addition to all this, superstition is generally so contrived, as to be reconcileable to the passions and vices of men; ever shifting its ground, and accommodating itself to *existing circumstances*. True religion insists upon unfeigned piety and devotion before God, and the exercises of integrity and benevolence among men; nor will it admit of ten thousand ostentatious displays as an equivalent for the want of any one of these excellencies. But superstition destroys these obligations, by placing in their room the empty shadow of ceremonies, with which there is a strange disposition in men to satisfy their consciences. In proportion, therefore, as men are attached to vice, but find that they must have something which shall at least bear the name of religion, they will generally prefer any mock solemnity to the injunctions of christianity, because the former is pliant to their wishes, while the latter expressly, and with perseverance declares, "WITHOUT HOLINESS NO MAN SHALL SEE THE LORD."

After all, methinks, if secular advantage were not so generally on the side of superstition, its prevalence would not be so great as we are the painful witnesses of. That it may be effectually supported, it is necessary to make it the interest of the majority at least, to keep it in countenance; hence it is that great honours and revenues are almost exclusively enjoyed by those who espouse this irrational cause; and though the conductors of a superstitious worship may not know how to reconcile it with religion, they find a requiem
for

for their consciences in this reflection, *By this craft we have our wealth.* Why are intriguing statesmen such uniform friends to this absurdity? It is thus accounted for: They have seldom any thing like a decided sentiment upon christianity; but as they find superstition an useful instrument in securing their authority, and gratifying their ambition, they give it the name of religion, and impose it upon the people; and thus it is, that *Through covetousness, they with feigned words make merchandize of them.*

Having considered the proneness of mankind to superstition, some of the evils attendant upon it, and the causes wherein it originates, we proceed,

LASTLY, To attempt some improvement of the subject, by offering two or three things to your attention as an antidote to superstition.

(1.) If you would avoid ~~the~~ fraudulent snare, and know how effectually to repel its various attacks, you must be determined that you will no longer receive christianity upon the credit of *others*, but resolve to understand the religion of JESUS CHRIST for *yourselves*, and know how to distinguish it from the flimsy inventions of men. There is every reason for your making the theology of the Saviour your principal study. God is the author of it; the great and glorious Being who is the Creator of all worlds—*whose throne is the Heaven, and whose footstool is the earth—who measureth the waters, meteth out the heavens, comprehendeth the dust of the earth, and weigheth the mountains*

mountains and hills—*before whom all nations are counted less than nothing and vanity.* The divine system of purity, which we wish with earnest affection to recommend to your best thoughts, proceeded from HIM who has given us existence, to whose bounty we are indebted for every comfort we enjoy, upon whom we are dependant for the completion of our hopes, *who is LIGHT, and with whom is no darkness at all.* Jesus Christ is that prophet whom the Lord our God hath raised up; him are we bound to hear in all things; for it will most assuredly come to pass, that every soul which will not hear this prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people. I wish not, however, to excite your dread, but to engage your affections in the cause of pure unmingled truth. The Saviour had the kindest intentions of promoting our present and eternal felicity, in all that he performed, endured, and taught. By an acquaintance with the truth as it is in him, men calmly ride upon the swelling billows of the most tempestuous ocean, and finding themselves in possession of that *Hope, which is an anchor of the soul,* smile at all the turbulence of the storm. In affliction they are resigned—in death calm, if not triumphant—and in eternity they inhabit the worlds of light and glory; where, *before the throne and before the Lamb, cloathed with white robes, and palms in their hands, they cry with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God, who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.* Seeing then, that blessings of such stupendous magnitude are presented
to

to our view, let us be scrupulously exact in our inquiries respecting the way in which we should walk, to the attainment of felicity, so unspeakable and boundless. Then our faith will no longer *stand in the wisdom of men*; but with the devout apostle we shall say, *I know in whom I have believed.*

(2.) Be persuaded that religious truth is not of so uninteresting a nature, as to render it indifferent whether you discover it or not; but that it ought to be considered by you as an investigation of serious importance. As an apology for the indolence of men, and that their ignorance may be kept in countenance, we are not unfrequently told, that "Religious sentiment is of no consequence." While on the one hand, I should be sorry to have my mind shriveled up by that impoverished contraction, which knows not how to make an allowance for the different modes of thinking which good men adopt; I am fully persuaded, that to represent religious sentiment as unimportant, is so far from having the sanction of the great founder of christianity, that his word is in direct opposition to it. Nothing would be easier than to shew, that the scriptures distinguish truth from error, and that they represent error as dangerous to be received, while, by every form of speech, they direct us to embrace the truth. It was of religious sentiment that the Son of God spake, when he said, *Take heed, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*

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When you are convinced of the importance of truth, you will become diligent in your inquiries; your assiduity will be crowned with discovery. Truth will unbosom her loveliest charms before your astonished eyes; you will be enamoured with her divine beauty, while with every amiable grace, she will sweetly pour the lessons of instruction into your delighted soul. Under the tuition of such a teacher in vain will error attempt to seduce you; you will know how to reply to her dark insinuations; you will become useful in guarding others against her deceptions, and thus become an important blessing to the church and the world. *If thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.*

(3.) Finally, if you would avoid the folly and evils attendant upon superstition, seriously consider the spirituality of that worship which the Almighty requires. What if in stately temples we daily offered the most costly and splendid sacrifices, still without the divine authority to sanction our performances, HE who hath informed us, that "To obey is better than sacrifice," would interrogate us in some such language as this,—WHO HATH REQUIRED THIS AT YOUR HANDS? While, on the other hand, though we may never unite in the celebration of pompous ceremonies—though it may be our lot to walk with the despised and persecuted,

secuted,—still, still, my brethren, if our hearts are found sound in the statutes of the Lord,—*The High and Lofty One who inhabiteth Eternity,* will say on our behalf, *To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.* In a word, *God is a Spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth.*

To him be glory and honour, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE END.

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TWO SERMONS,

PREACHED AT

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